

For example, the Pirates-Astros game is a "tug-of-war" game, which would have the punch any of some of the playoff games. (Among many a com-

From boxing to preaching



GEORGE FOREMAN
As happy as ever

■ FOREMAN

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unlighted, unpared street in northwest Houston.

There is a single naked lightbulb on the ceiling and wooden folding chairs set out. A stripped-down sound speaker mounted on a box is the pulpit. A picture of Jack Wingo's baby girl is on the end table next to the sofa. Wilson's electric guitar and amplifier are plugged into a socket.

Thirty people come to pray — all black, half children and most of the rest women. Somehow, they squeeze into the room, the smallest children crawling under the chairs.

Foreman, wearing blue jeans, plaid shirt, and cotton bush jacket, dwarfs his pulpit. He begins by telling the children to listen quietly or risk being "rapped upside the head." He eases into his topic — marriage and fidelity. It is a spontaneous sermon. It is rambling, but what it lacks in structure it makes up for in feeling. Wilson, sitting on the amplifier, encourages Foreman in a low voice.

"Five, twenty-two Ephesians," says Foreman, thumbing his Bible. The voice is strong and sympathetic.

"Wives, submit yourself to your husbands as unto the Lord . . ."

His eyes seek those of his audience.

"See, that's why we can't have no women submitting themselves to nobody else but their own husband. If you got a husband, that's why you got married, to have someone to submit yourself to. Thank you, Jesus.

"Some of these men want to counsel these women. They want to explain to them. No, no, don't you explain to them. God will take care of them. They say, 'No, I got to explain.' No, you don't. The Bible say let the older women teach the younger ones. Thank you, Jesus. Okay?"

He reads, "The husband is the head of the wife even as Jesus is the head of the church . . ."

"I was talking to a woman, and she was telling me, 'When a woman love a man, she don't ever stop loving him. She might marry somebody else, but she never stop loving him.' I listened to her for a long time, and finally I had to say, 'Sister, that's a lie.'

"She don't get into bed with nobody but the one she loves. She don't do it! She don't get into bed with another she might have did in the past.

"She said, 'I don't know, let me think about that. You might not know, you ain't no woman.'

"I said, 'Well I, know because I love Jesus Christ! I don't go messin' around with the Lord. You think I'm going to go jumping from bed to bed and defile myself? Maybe the Lord don't need me now, but when he do, I'm going to be pure and ready for him. That's right! I'm going to be RIGHT THERE! Thank you, Jesus!

"When a woman love a man, she be right there. I don't care if he be gone one year, two years, three years. I don't care if a man come to her with a big Fleetwood and a million dollars! She say, 'No, I'm going to wait for the one I love.' Thank you, Jesus."

Foreman's forehead is glistening. A mosquito contemplates it but doesn't land.

Wilson speaks next and briefly. And then they sing. My, how they sing loud, bluesy gospel. My, how Dexter plays his guitar.

"I don't need nobody but Jesus
"I don't need nobody but the Lord
"You know God come from above
"And He died that I might live
"And I don't need nobody but Jesus."

A basket is set out and the two-hour service is over. Foreman is standing outside Jack Wingo's house.

"Did you plan your sermon?" he is asked.
"No," says Foreman. "I don't know why I talked about marriage. I guess that was the message the Lord wanted me to give somebody tonight."

He is grinning as a thought occurs to him. His second marriage recently ended in divorce. He is supporting four children, one from his first marriage and three born out of wedlock.

"I don't know," he says. "Maybe that message is for me."

"Will you marry again?"
"Oh sure," says Foreman. "I ain't against marriage like all those Popes they got in Europe."

Foreman won an Olympic gold medal at Mexico City in 1968, waved an American flag in the ring and became famous or infamous, depending upon one's perspective at the time.
He was a patriotic black man with a ghetto

(Houston's Fifth Ward) and Job Corps background.

"That was my best moment as an athlete," he says today. "I still love this country."

He won the heavyweight championship in 1973 by knocking down undefeated champion Joe Frazier six times in two rounds in Jamaica. He was 6 feet 4, 230 pounds, undefeated, and considered perhaps the most powerful puncher in boxing history.

But he was no boxer, and Muhammad Ali took the title from him in 1974 with an eighth-round knockout in Zaire.

"As a boxer, I think I'll be remembered as much for beating Frazier as for losing to Ali," says Foreman.

At this point in Foreman's life, religion was a perfunctory exercise. "I used to go to church to meet the ladies," he says. "I remember in Africa, Ali called me a Christian, and I didn't even know what that was. I thought it was some nationality."

Foreman was in position for a shot at Ali's title in 1977 when he unexpectedly lost a 12-round decision to Jimmy Young on St. Patrick's Day in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Some people say a fight is not the only thing Foreman lost that night.

Foreman says God spoke to him in his dressing room afterward. He thought he died and was returned to life. He believed that Jesus had come alive in his body, and that the blood on his body was caused by a crown of thorns on his head.

His handlers conferred and decided something was wrong with Foreman.

"Everybody thought I was crazy," says Foreman. "Eight people tried to hold me down, but I jumped up and got under the shower and was screaming, 'I'm purifying myself.'"
"I told them all, 'You're witnessing a miracle.'"

His handlers and closest friends believed he was hallucinating, perhaps from dehydration, and sent him to a hospital.

"They examined me from head to toe and never did find nothing," says Foreman.

"You know all this science fiction stuff on television today? Ain't nothing as strange as what happened to me."

After Puerto Rico, Foreman intended to continue boxing, but gradually religious fervor overtook him.

"I intended to come back and tell the people what happened," says Foreman, "and I was going to go on boxing and do the whole deal. But this thing got greater and greater every day. Every day I lived, it got a greater hold on me."

He quit boxing at the age of 28.

"I was coming into my prime," says Foreman. "I was just learning what it was about. These last four years would have been my best as a boxer."

The address is in the fashionable North Hollow subdivision in North Houston. The modern house is in the \$150,000 range, and there are comfortable front and back yards.

The house dwarfs Jack Wingo's, where the service was held, but Foreman keeps it off limits to his congregation.

"I don't want no single ladies coming in here and getting no ideas," he says.

Inside is a parody of bachelor dishevelment. A set of barbells and a bench occupy the center of the den. Awards, pictures and mementoes sit atop the boxes they were moved in, waiting to be hung or shelved. Foreman's Olympic gold medal, however, was stolen a few years ago.

"I try to work out to keep my weight down so I don't have to buy new clothes," says Foreman. Conspicuous by its absence is a television.

"I don't watch any television," says Foreman. "I get my news from the papers. I haven't watched a boxing match in four years, but I read about them."

(When the name of WBA heavyweight champion Mike Weaver is mentioned, Foreman says, "Who's Mike Weaver?")

Foreman weighs 270 pounds and most of his added weight seems to have gone to his face, which is broader and fleshier than it was when he fought. His close-cropped hair adds to that impression. The way he looks now, Foreman would have a hard time returning to the ring. But that possibility is remote or nonexistent.

"I'm happier now than I've ever been in my life," says Foreman. "I feel I have found my niche."

"I don't condemn boxing or any sport. The Bible doesn't say nothing against it. What I condemn is the spirit of it. Greed and avarice. That's all it is. Everybody after money and fame. The Bible says, 'Ye shall seek the kingdom of God.' That's what is important. It's like

a little kid who plays in the dirt. He grows up, and one day it's not right to play in the dirt anymore."

The founding of his new church was an important step in his evangelism. He started out by preaching on the streets and in parks, and there his boxing identity made all the difference. "I used my past as bait," says Foreman. "The people in the streets cared about boxing, but the people in my church don't care about it."

Prior to the founding of his church, Foreman belonged to another Pentecostal congregation, also called First Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. He left when it seemed to him he was being exploited by the minister. Nancy Foreman, his mother, claims that Foreman gave at least \$118,000 to the church.

"I stay away from false prophets," says Foreman. "If I know a man's major goal is raising money, I don't associate."

His own fortune, he says, has evaporated. He still owns a 200-acre ranch in Marshall, Texas, but all the cattle have been sold. His fleet of foreign sports cars and Cadillacs has been reduced to one sedan. The house is his. The man who made \$5 million for one night's work in Zaire now sells industrial cleaning supplies to make ends meet.

"I don't spend a lot," says Foreman. "It don't take a lot of money to serve God. I have a saying: 'I made the wagon. I've broken away from the material life. I don't need it.'

"People say to me, 'Well, if you boxed, you could make a lot of money and feed poor people.' But that's not the kind of food I want to give them. I could make \$5 million and feed five million people for a day, but the next day they be hungry again. There's no end to it. What I want to give them will stick with them forever. They can have the word of the Lord all the time. That's what we mean by 'keeping the feast.' The more you sit at the Lord's table, the more He give you."

Within the Houston religious community, which in its Bible Belt fervor numbers 2000 churches, Foreman has built a quiet but sound reputation.

"At first everybody believed that at the first temptation to go back to boxing, he would," says Rev. John Lawson of Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church. "When Spinks beat Ali, and he didn't go back, it was obvious he was serious."

Foreman says he wants to return to all the places he fought — to preach. He will continue to be fervent as long as "visions" keep coming to him as they did in Puerto Rico.

"I had one come to me in my sleep," says Foreman. "I was in Times Square, and there was this man who looked like Elvis Presley playing a guitar. And on the big message board they got there with all the lights, 'I Love You' was spelled out."

"That was God letting me know He remembered me. I get visions all the time, but only when He's ready. It don't matter when I need one."

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